

## The marathon

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This, by no means, is a claim on originality of judgement... The key theme that formats the present political season is the time that is becoming increasingly short as the date of the parliamentary elections, due in March 2002, draws near.

A traditional feature of the Ukrainian parliamentary (and presidential) elections is the increase in number of declarations that they are going to be special, epochal, crucial for further development of the state and, therefore, critically important for development of a specific scenario for the state and the society. Let us remember the 1998 elections and the notorious claims about the «red threat» and possible «Communist relapse» that could hypothetically U-turn the country's orientation. The «basic indicators» of that type were rather effectively used in the presidential election campaign in 1999. Remember the demonstration of struggle between the Communist leader Petro Symonenko and the incumbent president Leonid Kuchma who had stressed anti-Communist values in his agenda.

However, the general skeptical and already rather routine description of the current political situation as that of the pre-election time has its objective distinguishing features. Probably, for the first time one of the steady postulates of a political campaign - about the «red threat» - will not be the key slogan of election campaigns, though there still be discussions of a certain «Moldovan version».

The anti-Communist rhetoric is being gradually substituted with other electoral postulates, primarily presenting the forthcoming parliamentary elections as a method of ensuring a «stable democracy» in Ukraine. Assorted centrist political players will try and convince voters that they are capable of ensuring that better than others and becoming leaders that will unite «democratic forces». However, there seems to be no consensus as to who represents those «democratic forces». Hence, a new feature of the campaign is the use of information innovations based on contents and forms formed and cultivated within the recent political years in the mass consciousness - for instance, the fight between «very bad oligarchs» who prevent reforms and «clean honest reformers» who oppose «the bandocracy regime». From the perspective of political techniques, the claim seems logical, as it depends on views of those who interpret them. However, hopefully, notwithstanding certain primitivism of some political players that tend to offer equally primitive situations and images, the Ukrainian political life is far more sophisticated than the schemes being displayed to public.

The current campaign is important in a sense of it being a «construction site» for laying the foundations for the future presidential election campaign of 2004. In this sense, this political season gives a start to a complex marathon that is designed to end not in March 2002 but in the autumn of 2004 - with all possible political and economic consequences for the country.

In this political marathon, like in sports, the victory depends on a number of objective and subjective factors. The start is particularly important. Otherwise the winners may share the fate of the Greek fellow who was the first to do the distance...

Hence, probability of success depends on ability to distribute one's forces adequately to last throughout the political distance. Unlike in marathon as a sport, politics in this case is a team effort, and the winner will be not the sole «runner», but a team that will make it to power. The current political teams and their leaders that feel themselves more or less comfortable on the political scene suggest that we may expect a change of the so-called «first train» of power in the near future: not just political elites, but also political generations. Nowadays, representatives of a «new generation» of power-brokers aged 40+ adopt and follow the «best traditions» of politicians in their 60s so fluently and naturally, that «dynamics of elites» in Ukraine seems to be very limited. However, possibly the younger political players who intend to make it to the decision-making and policy-making elite has so far preferred to

conceal their intentions... The situation is likely to become clearer during the 2002 elections, when ability and willingness to use the notorious «administrative resource» will indicate both the positions of the players in the current informal political arrangements and their attitude to the notion of fair play. In our case, the temptation to win the marathon grows rapidly when the hopes for the presidential election are involved. The forthcoming parliamentary elections are expected to show, among other things, whose claim for power and, potentially, the presidency has a more solid foundation.

A certain «constructive tension» in the «president -parliament - government» triangle remains characteristic of this political season. The new round of tension was marked by the first public criticism of the new government of Anatoly Kinakh by President Leonid Kuchma during the recent governmental conference on the national budget on August 30. «The government has to learn to tell the truth to people, no matter what it is like» (Den, September 1, 2001), Kuchma argued. The statement may suggest that in the president's opinion the government presently lacks that capacity... The parliament remains remarkably «diplomatic» in its assessments of the performance of the government. According to Speaker Ivan Pliushch, Anatoly Kinakh has been more successful in establishing a more effective cooperation with the parliament than his predecessor Victor Yushchenko, but so far that cooperation «has produced no specific results» (UNIAN, September 3, 2001).

The lack of definite rules of the electoral game adds flavor to the current political season. On August 14, 2001, President Kuchma vetoes the new election law again, while Ukrainian political parties and individual actors engaged in a number of large-scale publicity actions, including environmental campaigns (the Green party), establishment of a national network of compensation of savings lost by Ukrainians due to the collapse of financial pyramid schemes (the Batkivshchyna), played football with journalists (the Party of Reforms and Order), introduced mandatory football classes in school curricula (SDPU(o)), make a trip to Ukraine's highest mountain, the Hoverla (the two Rukhs) - i.e., directly engaged in election campaign and building their positive images.

The most recent version of the election law envisaged that 75% of parliamentary seats would be filled through competition of parties and blocks, while 25% would be available for winners of the race in majoritarian constituencies. As always, there are contrasting opinions about the ability of MPs to override the president's veto. According to leader of the Socialist party and head of the «Left Center» faction Oleksandr Moroz, there is a realistic chance to override the veto if the secret voting procedure is applied. In his opinion, in the secret voting procedure «the MPs who are under the Presidential Administration's thumb» (UNIAN, September 3, 2001) would be able to vote for that bill freely. Meanwhile, leader of the Communist party and its parliamentary faction Petro Symonenko announced that his faction would vote in favor of overriding the president's veto.

In order to override the veto, 300 votes of MPs are needed. On July 12 the parliament made an attempt to override the president's veto on the previous version of the election law, but failed. Instead, the MPs included some of President Kuchma's recommendations in a new version of the bill, but kept the 75% : 25% system that was rejected by the head of the state, and adopted the new bill. Later on, the president vetoed the new law again. Nowadays there are serious doubts that the parliament will manage to override the veto. Deputy Speaker Stepan Hawrysh (SDPU(o)) is confident that the MPs' attempt will fail. Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Ivan Pliushch has publicly stated that he is convinced that the new law «On Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine» «will be based on the current mixed election system» that involves filling 50% of the seats through political party lists and the other 50% of the seats through elections in majoritarian constituencies \*UNIAN, September 3, 2001). A new effort of MPs to override the veto is scheduled for September 13.

Another debated issue is the duration of the election campaign. According to Ivan Pliushch, the campaign should last for 90 days, while the MPs set the 180-day term in their version of the election law. Meanwhile, the parliamentary Committee for State Building and Local Self-governance intends to recommend that MPs consider a compromise: instead of 90 days, as proposed by the President of Ukraine, and 180 days as proposed by the parliament, the campaign should last for 170 days. According to member of the Committee Yuri Kliuchkovsky, the new law (vetoed by the president so far) divides the campaign into two stages. The first 90 days involve preparatory activities for nomination of candidates and submission of documents to the Central Election Commission (CEC), while the other 90 days are for running the campaign. If the term of the campaign is reduced, many political parties - potential participants of the race will be unable to collect 500 thousand signatures in their support for registration of the party or block in the Central Election Commission.

The opinion of the CEC on this matter is rather pessimistic. According to CEC chairman Mykhailo Ryabets, if the MPs fail to adopt a new election law by October 12 and have it signed by the President, the election campaign will not begin at all. The point is that the Constitutional Court of Ukraine judged as non-constitutional some provisions of the current election law, according to which the nomination of candidates was expected to begin on October 12. Hence, the CEC will not be able to use the «old» election law, adopted in October 1997, for the forthcoming campaign. Furthermore, since there is no law, no budget for the CEC for running the elections has been earmarked.

Similarly, no clear shape of election blocks and party lists has been made public so far. Victor Yushchenko's Nasha Ukraina still remains a virtual block. The recent indication that the block has been being formed is Victor Yushchenko's statement that identifying specific participants of the Nasha Ukraina block is «a matter of a few days». Hence, «we have agreed in our group that the official information about participants of the block will be made after a political memorandum is signed...» «final negotiations and agreements are in process, but I would not undertake to name the council [of the block]. Though that is, obviously, a matter of a few days» (UNIAN, September 3, 2001). Thus, the emergence of a clear shape of the block has been delayed again.

Similar political building processes occur with regard the construction of another political «mainland», referred to by journalists and commentators, and often the politicians themselves, as TUNDRA - quite a strange name, given the firm association with the vast cold and scarcely populated northern lands. In July 2001 the participants of the would-be block - the Party of the Regions, the People's Democratic Party, the Trudova Ukraina and the Agrarian Party - signed a declaration to form an election block and, later on, announced the decision to merge in a single party (no title or leadership announced so far). On September 4 the Political Executive Committee of the Trudova Ukraina announced the decision to join the election block with the PDP, the Party of the Regions and the Agrarians. Commenting on the decision, leader of the Trudova Ukraina Serhiy Tihipko stated he was «100 percent sure that we will go for the 2002 elections in this group» (UNIAN, September 5, 2001). However, Mykola Azarov, head of the State Taxation Administration and leader of the Party of the Regions (an informal «big brother» in the TUNDRA), announced officially on behalf of his political partners: «We have something to talk about with Victor Yushchenko's block. I do not exclude [the possibility] that our block may go together with Yushchenko's block for the 2002 elections» (Ukraina Moloda, August 31, 2001). While no clear public reaction of Yushchenko to Azarov's speculations followed, it is possible that the two leaders will find common grounds and strike some sort of a «gentlemen's agreement» about not opposing each other in the race.

So, the process of drawing political sketches goes on. The final bargaining and establishment of clear blocks between parties for achieving common goals is still a thing in the future. Not too distant, though... In this sense politics is not only the art of compromise, but also the art of gambling. An important thing is not to lose the right moment.